

520mc499

PICTURE STUDY

BY

E. C. PLUMPTRE (C.M.C.)

PARENTS' NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL UNION
LONDON

7

PICTURE STUDY

By E. C. PLUMPTRE (C.M.C.)

No piece of work undertaken in life will overstep its aims. Though men fail again and again to achieve their highest aims, they never drift unawares above the level they have desired. This truth applies also to lessons given. But in the rush of daily life, or among the exacting demands of a full time-table, the aim once in view is easily lost to sight. So from time to time it is a good thing to call to mind the aims in giving certain subjects to the children and the end to be achieved. The aims of Picture Study lessons and some of the means by which they may be attained are considered in what follows.

The children in the P.U.S. have Picture Study every term from six years old upwards. Between that age and, say, fifteen a child has studied reproductions of pictures by some thirty of the world's famous artists, and may own a considerable collection of reproductions of their works. Why are these lessons arranged? In order that children may be put in touch with the contribution that each famous artist has made to the world's store of all that is beautiful and 'worth-while.' Just as Literature introduces us to the thought of the greatest writers, so Picture Study opens the gates to the ideas of the famous artists. To deprive anyone of such an introduction is to shut him off from a wide field of enrichment and enjoyment; there are other, secondary, aims to the lessons. Powers of observation increase as children learn to *look* at a picture, a sense of beauty will be more fully developed with further power to appreciate. But these aims do not stand first; they are incidental. It is the child's contact with the work of the artist that takes foremost place. Here lies a difficulty. It is so easy for us to stand between

the children and that contact; without our help it may never be made, over-much help may prevent it from being direct contact. The grown-up who takes the lesson is an all-important middleman, but, like other middlemen, she must be lost in the background. There are many pictures that make their own independent appeal. Her judgment must tell when the helping word is needed, or when — as is specially the case with older children — too much speaking or over-much enthusiasm may be a barrier.

At this point it is convenient to consider the question of how much of the life of the artist children need to know. The general principle is — only so much as is really necessary to the enjoyment of his pictures, except in the case of girls of thirteen, fourteen or upwards. For example, when looking at Fra Angelico's pictures it is a real help to know of his saintly life in the community of monks at San Marco, though the rest of his life is of no importance. Or, to give another example, Millet's works are better appreciated by those who know that he led the hard life of a peasant, though the details of this life are not necessary. But for the pictures of Raphael, Memlinc or Constable the artist's life is of no importance. To attempt to interest small children too much in this may even take away opportunities of gaining intimacy with the man's pictures, and they are what he gave to the world.

In every Picture Study lesson it is important that there should be a short time in which children can look quietly at the picture, uninterrupted by questions or discussion. That is when there will be the best chance for each one to gain his own link with the picture and its painter's thought. Just how much time should be given to this, and at what stage in the lesson it should come, are matters that call for much discrimination. Many children love to 'chatter' about the picture, and it is right that there should be plenty of free discussion. But if this is quite unrestricted there is the danger that it may degenerate into mere chatter, and also the possibility that the bolder child will come out with everything before the quieter one has a chance to express himself. The place of this discussion

in the lesson depends upon many factors — not least the picture itself. In any case there are always those few minutes for studying the picture quietly. As the children find what is expected from them in the description that follows straight upon the 'looking,' so they learn to 'look' and not to gaze vaguely. At first there will be wandering attention among younger ones, unless a little help has been given beforehand. But this help must never be an explanation of the picture — that would be taking the child's part from him. It consists of any facts that may be needed by the child to enable him to enjoy and to describe. For a picture of *St. Christopher* an outline of the story is needed. With little children it is better to tell or read this before they have the picture, and then let them have the fun of discovering which part of the story is illustrated.

With very large classes it is not always possible for each child to have a copy of the pictures. But even with a single set there is no need for the children to miss that undisturbed contact. For a week beforehand the picture for the next lesson will be on the classroom wall, and after the first rush to see what it is, there will seldom be an odd minute before or after classes when one or two people are not standing in front of it and just looking. When the lesson comes round, different members of the class tell what has been gathered from the picture, the teacher explains anything not understood, and between them the class give a well-ordered description. Memory sketches may be added if the children are old enough, either individually or collectively on the blackboard, or a tableau pose of a group of figures may be given.

The foregoing are general considerations applying to lessons with children of any age. But at different ages varying aspects appeal. With 6—10 year-olds it is mainly the details that fascinate and the description given by the children should include as many as possible. Very likely it will contain nothing else. But the discussion may give an opportunity of leading towards something further. Suppose Gainsborough's portrait of Edward Orpin, the Parish Clerk, has been described. Someone of eight years old may have noticed his beautiful, thoughtful

face. The question, 'Why do you think he looks so happy?' may or may not bring a satisfactory answer. But it will make an opening for the realization that his Bible reading has brought this to him. Such ideas lead to that fuller understanding in older years which will find the thought that as the sun lightens his features, so the Bible has shed light on his mind and given him such a noble countenance.

Some little children are astonishingly quick to notice small details, while others seldom see anything in the background. A word from a grown-up often helps them to find what is there without actually showing details. The father digging in the garden in Millet's *Labecquée* may have been missed. When he has been 'found' there may be opportunity for giving an idea—he is at his daily task, just as the mother is at hers; it is part of the divine ordering that there is no food for man without labouring; the daily round and the yearly rotation;—different thoughts appeal to different people. Of course there must never be any forcing of meaning where none is intended. Gainsborough's *Market Cart* or Millet's *Girl Watering a Cow* are straightforward pictures and should be taken as such.

By eleven years old children should be giving orderly descriptions of pictures, and training in this must begin gradually some years before. By an 'orderly' description is meant one in which the principal objects and their positions are mentioned first, so that a listener who has never seen the picture gains a general idea of the arrangement (sometimes it is not a bad idea to imagine that someone who has not seen the picture is present!) Then the details are given, not haphazard, but on some considered plan. For example, when describing Millet's *The Shepherdess*, shepherdess, flock, plain, dog, time of day comes first and then follow the details of her clothes, the sheep, the distant landscape and the lighting. With a more complicated picture, such as Durer's *St. Jerome in his Study*, the narrator must give some thought if a successful 'general outline' is to come first. Children in classes soon become critical in this respect, and it is not a bad plan

for the teacher to keep her own record of children who have begun in this way, so that she may see that a first description falls to as many as possible. Although there is no teaching of composition, work along these lines prepares the way for its appreciation later on.

Some time between eleven and sixteen most girls go through a stage of intense criticism. Anything stiff, unusual and awkward is noticed immediately, and Italian or Flemish Primitives are not easily appreciated, even by those who at six or seven loved such pictures. For at that age the spiritual appeal of the picture is direct and unfettered by the attitude of maturer years. Naturally this growing sense of valuation—criticism—is not yet coupled with discrimination. To keep a happy medium is the teacher's part. Children should not be allowed to spend much time in rather pointless discussions over details. If some corners of the picture are rather dark, or if there is a small reproduction of a very detailed picture, e.g. Memlinc's *Light of the World*, the fact that everything will not be clear must be accepted and it must be realized that in consequence everyone has a right to her own opinion. When studying Manet's portrait of his parents, or Gainsborough's one of his two daughters, it is the faces and personalities that are important, not the details of the curtains or trees or whatever is behind the figures. So the balance of the lesson is kept in the right place.

It is a good thing to give children of this age a variety of ways to 'narrate' the picture. In addition to oral or written descriptions, there are memory sketches, sometimes of details sometimes of the grouping of the whole, sometimes monochrome studies of dark and light masses. As a rule it is principal lines that should be memorised, and it is well for none but the most gifted to put in facial features.

From fifteen years old upwards Picture Study assumes a slightly different aspect. The history of the development of the 'schools' of Western European Painting is being studied in Mary Innes' book, and the artist for the term takes his place in this development or in relation to other members of the

same school. Moreover, direct attention will now be paid to the composition of a picture; the particular pictures studied fall into place as regards the artist's work as a whole; there is some knowledge of his contribution to the history of painting and of his special characteristics.

This paper has dealt with a number of possible difficulties but not because Picture Study is a 'difficult' subject. Indeed all that is needed is enthusiasm and interest for pictures and understanding of children. Everyone will have a slightly different method of carrying out the lessons; some may disagree with the suggestions given here. But whatever the method used in a lesson, the end achieved is always the same. The children have been put in touch with one of the 'great' men of the world and with a part of his work, which was himself, because it was creative work.